

Sophia Duleep Singh



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Princess Sophia Duleep Singh is best known as a suffragette and campaigner for women's rights. Daughter of deposed Maharaja Duleep Singh and goddaughter of [Queen Victoria](#) she used her fame, position and tenacity in the fight for gender equality in the early 20th century.

Sophia's campaigning attracted the attention of both the press and the government. Her tireless activities ranged from participating in landmark historical events such as 'Black Friday' to routinely selling copies of *The Suffragette* newspaper outside [Hampton Court Palace](#).

Sophia's philanthropy extended far beyond women's rights and she supported many groups, particularly Indians and Sikhs wherever she encountered them. Her life was truly dedicated to the fight for equality and the support of others.



Image: Sophia Duleep Singh as a baby with her mother, Maharani Bamba. © Peter Bance

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EARLY LIFE

Sophia Jindan Alexandrovna Duleep Singh was born on 8 August 1876, the daughter of Maharaja Duleep Singh and Bamba Müller.

Maharaja Duleep Singh was the last Maharaja of Lahore, deposed by the British at the age of 10. Bamba Müller was the illegitimate daughter of a wealthy German banker and an enslaved Abyssinian (Ethiopian) woman named Sofia.

In 1854 the deposed Maharaja travelled to England, and was naturalised as a British Citizen. He lived on a pension of £25,000 a year which he was granted provided he 'remain obedient to the British Government'.



Image: Maharani Jind Kaur, (1817 - 1863), also popularly known as Rani Jindan, grandmother of Sophia Duleep Singh. She was the youngest wife of Maharajah Ranjit Singh and the mother of Sophia's father, Maharajah Duleep Singh. History / Topfoto

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Sophia's names show a truly international and remarkable family history: Sophia, after her enslaved Ethiopian maternal grandmother; Jindan, after her paternal grandmother, Maharani Jind Kaur; and Alexandrovna, after her godmother Queen (Alexandrina) Victoria.



Image: The interior of Elvedon Hall, Sophia's childhood home. PA Photos / TopFoto

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AN UNSTABLE CHILDHOOD

Sophia's early childhood was spent in Elvedon Hall in Suffolk, which was purchased by her father in 1863. The Elvedon estate provided the family with all the pastimes expected by the English aristocracy, particularly riding and shooting.

The house itself was rebuilt by her father with an Italianate exterior and palatial Mughal interior, full of rich textiles and furnishings. It must have been a truly wondrous place to be a child. Outside, exotic animals and birds roamed the gardens including golden pheasants, parrots, and peacocks.



Image: Maharaja Duleep Singh in 1880. © Peter Bance

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This fantastical childhood was not though to last. Sophia's parents' relationship broke down and Maharaja Duleep Singh spent the last six years of his life in Paris, campaigning to be returned to the throne of Lahore.

Worse still, in 1887 Sophia's mother died, after which the children were in the care of the Arthur Craigie Oliphant, chosen by Queen Victoria to be guardian.

The children first lived in the Oliphant family home in Folkestone, and then in their Brighton home. In Brighton Sophia received four years of education at a nearby girls' day school, after which she finished her education on a six-month tour with her sisters, staying in Holland, Germany, Greece, Italy, and Egypt.



*Image: Hampton Court Palace in the early 20th century.
Sophia regularly walked her dogs in the palace grounds
while she lived at Faraday House.*

PRINCESS SOPHIA AT FARADAY HOUSE

Like her sisters Bamba and Catherine, Sophia inherited the sizeable fortune of £23,000 from her father. This was arguably a mere fraction of the wealth they could have expected from their patrimony.

In 1896 Queen Victoria gave Princess Sophia Faraday House, then part of the Hampton Court Estate, as a grace and favour residence. The Queen also granted her an allowance of £200 a year to maintain it.

While not the palatial surroundings her birth might have afforded her, Faraday House at least gave her the security of a home and a place to entertain.



Image: Sophia with her horse and dogs. © Peter Bance
Sophia's other hobbies included photography and music. At Faraday House she kept all sorts of instruments and sheet music, and was particularly fond of Liszt, Schubert and Ravel.

PASSIONS AND PASTIMES

Sophia had a real zest for life and many passions. She was sporty, playing hockey and riding and cycling frequently. She loved travel and was energetic on the aristocratic social scene.

A keen animal lover, the Princess walked her dogs in the gardens of Hampton Court Palace, for which she had her own key. She kept and showed numerous breeds of dogs including impressive Russian wolfhounds.

Sophia was a member of the Ladies' Kennel Association and showed her dogs on several occasions, including at the Annual Toy Dog Show at Crystal Palace, of which she was President in 1914.

Sophia loved fashion and acquired her clothes and accessories from the finest fashion houses of London and Paris. Sophia's older sisters often warned her not to be so decadent in her purchases. This didn't stop her dressing her servants in fine burgundy uniforms, the men resplendent in gold embroidered waistcoats.

DID YOU KNOW?

Sophia bought a Steinway grand piano costing £136, about a quarter of her annual budget.



Image: Sophia (on the right) with her sisters Bamba and Catherine. © Peter Bance

TRAVEL TO INDIA

Sophia travelled twice to India with her sister Princess Bamba, in 1907 and 1924. The first time they visited family in Lahore and Amritsar, the second was a tour of Kashmir, Lahore, Amritsar and Muree.

The second visit was an emotional one, and nearly caused problems for the local authorities. In Lahore the crowds were excited to see the Princesses, resplendent in saris and traditional jewels, and shouted 'The Princesses are here, the daughters of Maharajah Duleep Singh.' Others shouted 'We are with you, we will give you the world.' In the end the police dispersed the crowd.

Sophia had both pride and sympathy for the Indian people, writing in one letter, 'I was delighted to see the house of my ancestors, but oh dear how primitive it all is.'

A FRIEND TO MANY

Princess Sophia supported Indians, particularly women, throughout her life. She formed close ties with the Sikh community in London visiting the Sikh temple at Shepherds Bush regularly. She frequently attended functions organised by the India Office, including receptions for distinguished Indian visitors.

Sophia supported the Indian Women's Education Association, volunteering at their stall at Claridges in 1921, which was arranged by the Conservative Women's Reform Movement.

Like her father Sophia supported the Lascars Club, which supported Indian Seamen and sailors stranded in London.

SUPPORTING HER FAMILY

Sophia also paid for the education of one of her cousins, Gurdit Singh, in India.

SOPHIA DULEEP SINGH,

THE SUFFRAGETTE

Sophia was a long-time supporter of the Women's Suffrage movement and a leading campaigner in the fight for women's rights in Britain. She was an active member of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), becoming a prominent member of the Richmond and Kingston-upon-Thames district branches.

Sophia was often seen selling *The Suffragette* newspaper at her pitch at Hampton Court Palace. Indeed, much of the information we have about Sophia's activities come from *The Suffragette* and *Votes for Women* newspapers.



Below: Sophia selling subcriptions to the Suffragette newspaper on her pitch outside Hampton Court Palace. © Museum of London

**NO VOTE, NO CENSUS. AS WOMEN
DO NOT COUNT, THEY REFUSE TO BE
COUNTED. I HAVE A CONSCIENTIOUS
OBJECTION TO FILLING UP THIS
FORM.**

Sophia Duleep Singh on her census return in 1911

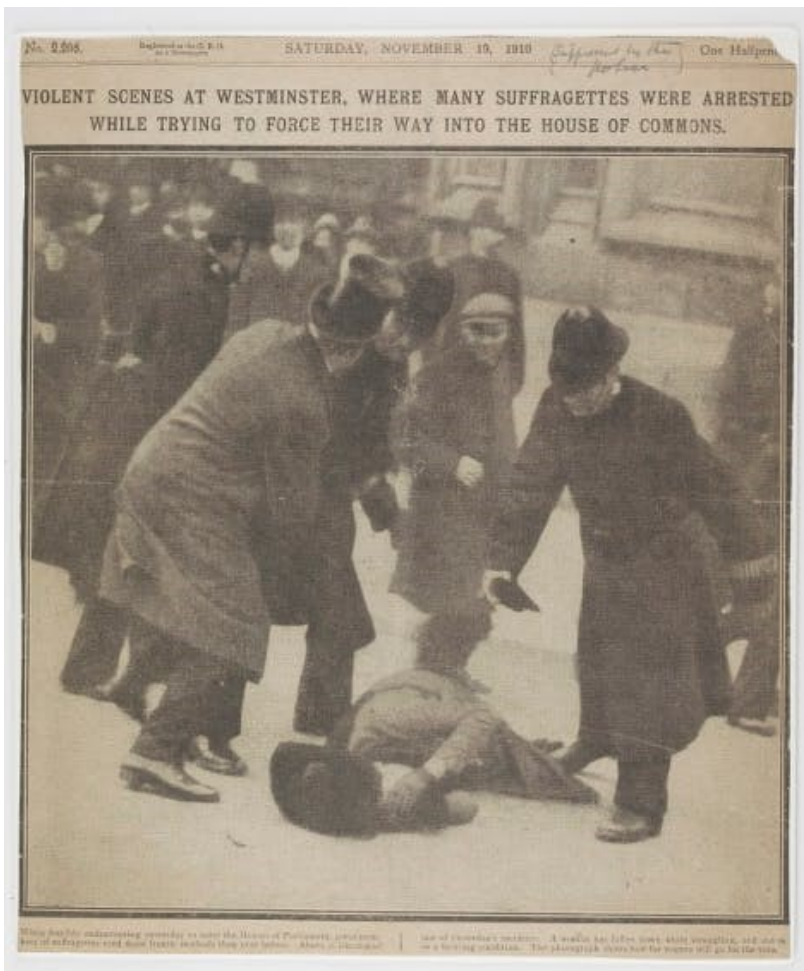


Image: The front page of the Daily Mirror on 19 November 1910, with the headline 'Violent scenes at Westminster, where many suffragettes were arrested while trying to force their way into the House of Commons'. © Museum of London

BLACK FRIDAY

Princess Sophia was present on 'Black Friday', 18 November 1910. On this day, more than 300 suffragettes marched from Caxton Hall to Parliament Square and demanded to see the Prime Minister.

When the Prime Minister refused to see them and the protestors refused to disperse, the police responded with brutality. Over six hours, 200 women were physically and sexually assaulted. Two would later die from their injuries.

That day, Princess Sophia was in the vanguard with Dr Elizabeth Garrett Anderson and Emmeline Pankhurst herself. When violence erupted, the Princess rescued a suffragette from a police officer, who was treating her extremely roughly. She then pursued the officer until she discovered his identification number (V700), in order to make a formal complaint. She stated: "The policeman was unnecessarily and brutally rough and Princess Sophia hopes he will be suitably punished."

Home Secretary Winston Churchill was blamed by the Metropolitan Police Commissioner for encouraging the police in their violent response — an accusation he later denied. Over 100 protesters were arrested on Black Friday,

but all were released the next day without charge on Churchill's orders. The Home Secretary refused an official enquiry.

NO VOTE, NO TAX!

Sophia is even better known as a member of the Women's Tax Reform League (WTRL), which campaigned on the principal – 'No Vote, No tax!'.

In May 1911 Sophia was summoned to court and fined £3 for keeping a man-servant, five dogs and a carriage without licence. In 1913 she was summoned again to answer for keeping dogs and a carriage without a licence.

The Princess protested that taxation without representation was tyranny: "When the women of England are enfranchised and the state acknowledges me as a citizen I shall, of course, pay my share willingly towards its upkeep."

DID YOU KNOW?

The WTRL refused to pay a variety of taxes, insurances and license fees, including income tax, property tax, dog tax, and even servant insurance.

Sophia was fined £12 10s. with costs. Her refusal to pay resulted in some of her jewels being confiscated and auctioned at Twickenham Town Hall, when both were purchased by Miss Gertrude Eaton, The Honourable Secretary of the WTRL.

Later that year, a further diamond ring was confiscated when Sophia likewise refused to pay a fine. When auctioned the ring was bought by Mrs Jopling Rowe, who presented it back to Princess Sophia to much applause.



Image: Catherine Duleep Singh. © Peter Bance

SISTERS IN ARMS

Sophia's older sister Catherine was an also active member of the suffrage movement and a member of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), which was founded in 1897.

Catherine frequently attended events promoting the Suffrage cause, and in November 1912 opened an event in Birmingham promoting 'Constitutional women's suffrage work'.

Catherine and Sophia continued to attend dinners and gatherings of the movement, even after women had won the right to vote.



Image: Sophia during her time as a nurse. © Peter Bance

WARTIME

During the First World War, the WSPU and WTRL temporally ceased activity to support the war effort. Princess Sophia was part of the 10,000 strong Women's War Work Procession led by Emmeline Pankhurst in 1915.

During the war Sophia was particularly keen to emulate and help the thousands of Indians who were fighting for the Allied Powers. In 1916 Sophia raised money for the Red Cross selling Indian flags at Dewar House in Haymarket. She did this with other Indian women, as part of the 'Our Day' celebration of the anniversary of the British Red Cross.

In 1918, the YMCA War Emergency Committee, of which Sophia was Honourable Secretary, organised a flag day in London and later 'India Day' for the support of India's soldiers and Labour Corps. The latter event provided 50,000 huts for the comfort of Indian soldiers.

The Princess visited and even nursed troops at Brighton Pavilion and other hospitals for Indian soldiers. Many soldiers were amazed to see the Princess, and granddaughter of the famed Maharaja Ranjit Singh, in the flesh, and she gave out mementoes of signed photographs and little ivory mirrors.



Image: Sophia in 1930. © Peter Bance

LATER LIFE

During the Second World War Sophia moved to Coalhatch House, Penn in Buckinghamshire with her sister Catherine. There she took in evacuees, siblings John, Michael and Shirley Sarbutt from West London.

The children remembered the stay fondly, recalling oriental ornaments, ample food and a parrot called Akbar. During air-raids they would squeeze into the air-raid shelter surrounded by the Princesses' dogs.

Princess Sophia died in her sleep on 22 August 1948. On her instructions, a full band played Wagner's 'Funeral March' at her cremation and her ashes were taken to India for burial.

SOPHIA DULEEP SINGH'S LEGACY

Although not a fan of public speaking, and often anxious not to draw attention away from fellow suffragettes, Sophia's celebrity was ultimately an important asset for the Suffragette movement.

In 1918 the Representation of the People Act gave some women over the age of 30 the right to vote in British parliamentary elections. However, this was not the end of the matter for Princess Sophia who continued to campaign for equality all her life.

PASSION FOR THE CAUSE

In the 1934 edition of Women's Who's Who, Sophia listed Advancement of Women as her only interest.

SUGGESTED READING

For more information on Sophia Duleep Singh and her family, please refer to the following books and websites:

Sophia: Princess, Suffragette, Revolutionary by Anita Anand (London, 2015)
Sovereign, Squire & Rebel: Maharajah Duleep Singh by Peter Bance (London, 2009) and [accompanying website](#).
Asians in Britain: 400 Years of History by Rozina Visram (London, 2002)

<https://duleepsingh.com/>

Princess Sophia Duleep Singh's UK home gets commemorative Blue Plaque

She was the daughter of Maharaja Duleep Singh and the goddaughter of Queen Victoria



Authors Anita Anand (C) and Peter Bance (L) during unveiling of the English Heritage Blue Plaque to commemorate Princess Sophia Duleep Singh at Hampton Court Palace in London, on Friday. PTI Photo

London, May 26 2023

Princess Sophia Duleep Singh, the daughter of Maharaja Duleep Singh – the last ruler of the Sikh empire – and the goddaughter of Queen Victoria, was honoured with a commemorative Blue Plaque in London on Friday.

The Blue Plaque scheme, run by the English Heritage charity, honours the significance of particular buildings associated with historical figures. In memory of the British-Indian Princess, it now adorns Faraday House, which was granted to Sophia and her sisters as a grace and favour apartment at Hampton Court Palace southwest of London by Queen Victoria.

“As a political journalist, I thought I knew the story of the suffragettes, and then I found this extraordinary woman and she blew me away,” said Anita Anand, the author of the biography ‘Sophia: Princess, Suffragette, Revolutionary’.

“As the last princess of the Sikh Empire, goddaughter of Queen Victoria, society darling and fashion icon, a life of comfort and celebrity was hers for the taking, but she chose a harder path. Using her international fame and influence,

putting herself in physical danger, she fought for the right of women to vote. Campaigning with unrelenting ferocity, loyalty and selflessness, she moved the dial,” she said.

Named after another former resident, the eminent English physicist Michael Faraday (1791–1867), Faraday House was Princess Sophia's main residence for over four decades.

Furnished to her luxurious taste, the house – or “Apartment 41” to give it its grace-and-favour title – was Princess Sophia's base during the many years she campaigned as a suffragette for women's voting rights.

Peter Bance, a British Sikh historian, art collector and author of ‘Sovereign, Squire and Rebel: Maharajah Duleep Singh & the Heirs of the Lost Kingdom' who campaigned for the plaque said, “I came upon the story of the princess when I was researching her father Duleep Singh at a time when no one had heard about her. It was as if her story had been erased from history. But once a forgotten princess, she has now become an icon.” Uniquely spanning the very different worlds of the British court and the movement for women's suffrage in the early 20th century,

Sophia Duleep Singh made full use of her royal title and public persona.

“I remember my godmother Princess Sophia telling me about the suffragettes and how women weren't always allowed to vote as we walked through the gardens at Hampton Court together. And then, as a child, I made a solemn vow to her that I would always exercise my right to vote, and I always have,” said Drovna Oxley, goddaughter to Princess Sophia.

The princess, who died aged 71 in August 1948, dared the authorities to punish her as she shrewdly chose which political protests to attend, ones they could not ignore. Her residence at Faraday House was not without controversy as reflected in a much-publicised photograph of her selling 'The Suffragette' paper outside Hampton Court Palace, which led to her eviction from the property being discussed in court and government circles.

The idea was eventually dismissed as it would have dragged the Crown into the parliamentary suffrage debates of the time. Faraday House was also raided by bailiffs seeking redress for her non-payment of taxes after she

joined the Women's Tax Resistance League (WTRL) in 1911.

“Princess Sophia was a fascinating and important figure, but her story was not at all well known in the decades following her death. I'm delighted that interest in her has grown in recent years. English Heritage hopes that our blue plaque will help ensure that she's firmly established in the pantheon of great campaigners for women's suffrage,” said Anna Eavis, Curatorial Director at English Heritage.

Duleep Singh was the last Maharaja of Punjab as the son and heir of Maharaja Ranjit Singh who was exiled to England as a teenager in 1854. He shared a close bond with Queen Victoria until he grew critical of the British Empire in later life.

It was on his request that the Queen agreed to be the godmother of his daughter Sophia and went on to grant use of Faraday House to the family for the rest of their lives even as her relationship with their father soured.

During her life, Sophia maintained a strong connection with India and her ashes were taken to India by her sister Bamba in 1949.